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## Irene Emery, 1900–1981



Irene Emery, Curator Emeritus at the Textile Museum and one of the world's foremost authorities on fabric structures, died suddenly on May 21, 1981. Miss Emery is chiefly known for her monumental work, *The Primary Structures of Fabrics: An Illustrated Classification*, published in 1966 and increasingly considered the definitive systematic and descriptive classification of fabric structures.

Always intrepid and independent, she had careers in modern dance, teaching and performing with the Martha Graham company and in sculpture, working on various WPA projects and other commissions before turning to textiles in the Forties. She became a professional handweaver and studied southwestern textiles at the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe while formulating the concept behind *The Primary Structures*. Coming to The Textile Museum in 1954, first as Research Curator and then as Curator of Technical Studies, she devoted most of her energies to this work until its publication. She then made a more detailed study of gauze weaves which culminated in a major exhibition in 1970. Although officially retired in that year, she continued to come to the Museum as often as she was physically able. She trained the curatorial

staff of the Textile Museum both formally in weekly seminars and informally, with advice given on a variety of projects and publications. It was her expressed concern for the relative isolation in which most textile scholars work that prompted the establishment of the Irene Emery Roundtable on Museum Textiles, of which there have been seven meetings since 1973.

Her loss is not the Textile Museum's alone, but a loss to all who are interested in the structures of fabrics. Her familiarity with textiles and related literature from all periods and parts of the world, and her acute ability to distill essentials led her to a mastery of the whole subject of pre-industrial textiles that few other scholars have attained. She also brought to her work a sense of logic learned as a philosophy major in college and a love of the precise uses and meanings of words, both of which were essential in making the book the truly remarkable achievement it is. The physical self discipline learned in her dancing days and the craftsmanship acquired in her artistic work also contributed to the success of the project.

We at the Textile Museum have also lost a good friend, for she never ceased to be interested in all that went on at the Museum or anything else that concerned us. She edited, as she wrote, with great tact and incisiveness. She greeted all with warmth, a smile, and twinkling eyes. She was always elegantly dressed, both with a hat, which she said she always had to wear out-of-doors for her health, and high heeled shoes, which made the rest of us nervous because her physical condition included an impaired sense of balance. Intrepid to the last, she faced adversity with both complaint and a trenchant sense of humor.

In recognition of her great and lasting contributions to textile studies, The Textile Museum is establishing an Irene Emery Memorial Fund. This Fund will be used to support research and publication of the work of textile scholars, especially in the field of fabric structures, areas in which other sources of funds are not readily available. Contributions to this Fund are welcome from all friends of The Textile Museum and Irene Emery and are of course tax deductible.

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